

New Russian Silos May Be Just Better Shields for ICBMs

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WASHINGTON — New Soviet missile silos, initially interpreted by some as the beginning of a new generation of strategic weapons, may only be "hardened" sites to protect existing Russian ICBMs against attack, Administration sources said Wednesday.

The more cautious view has developed as work has progressed on an estimated 60 silos since the construction was first observed by U.S. reconnaissance satellites.

The development was first reported March 7 by Sen. Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash.). Last month, Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird told newspaper publishers "recent evidence confirms the sobering fact that the Soviet Union is involved in a new—and apparently extensive—ICBM construction program."

But sources said Wednesday that two-thirds of the new silos appear designed for the existing SS-11 ICBM, which is comparable to the U.S. solid-fueled Minuteman.

They said the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency nevertheless agree it is still too early to be certain whether the Russians are hardening launch silos for existing missiles or preparing to deploy new or improved offensive weapons.

Pentagon spokesman Jerry W. Friedheim said Wednesday the work, observed in areas associated with both the SS-11 and the much larger, liquid-fueled SS-9 ICBM leaves open a wide range of possibilities.

Among them, he said, is a possibility that development is being pursued on two new silo systems. This could be simply silo hardening, he said, a prelude to deployment of missiles with multiple independently targetable warheads, or introduction of new missiles with improved guidance and con-

If the work represents an effort to harden the silos against attack, it would appear to indicate the Russians are not pushing to achieve a nuclear first-strike capability against the United States.

Leaning to Site Hardening

"We said very early in this discussion that . . . we were not certain what the Soviets' intentions are," Friedheim said. "It remains our current assessment that we are not sure what the Soviets are doing."

However, other sources said that as more evidence has accumulated the interpretation has leaned more toward a site-hardening program.

The first 10 new silos were discovered in February. By last month, the number had grown to 40.

Friedheim said that in late April or early May it began to appear that two new silo systems were being developed. Besides the new holes observed in operational missile areas, Friedheim said, new silos have also appeared in areas where test firings have been conducted.

That left unanswered the question of why new silos would be constructed at missile test sites if the construction program only involved the hardening of silos for defensive purposes.

Follows Slowdown

The flurry of activity comes immediately after a period in which defense officials believed the Soviet Union was slowing down its ICBM deployment, having surpassed by about 400 the number of land-based ICBMs in the U.S. arsenal.

Although the Soviet strategic buildup has been accomplished through deployment of more missiles, the United States is now concentrating on equipping its nuclear striking force with multiple independently targetable warheads.

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